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AUTHOR Hyink, Barbara, G.; Head, Fay A.
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ABSTRACT

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University/Public School Collaboration: Graduate Research Assistants Staff a Public School Research Department

Barbara G. Hyink, Ed.D., Lecturer
Box 4560, College of Education
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas 79409

Fay A. Head, B.A., Graduate Student
College of Education
Texas Tech University

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Abstract

Colleges of education and public schools are often involved in a "love/hate" relationship due to their interdependence. One university and public school system are seeking solutions through collaborative programs. Texas Tech University leases research services to the Lubbock Independent School District in the form of graduate students assigned to do research desired by the school district. The program is in it's fifth year and has provided quality research to the school district while supporting several doctoral students.

University/Public School Collaboration:
Graduate Research Assistants
Staff a Public School
Research Department

Statement of the Problem

Colleges of education and public schools are often involved in a sort of "love/hate" relationship (De Bevoise, 1986; Smith & Auger, 1985-86). They are dependent upon each other in that public schools require teachers who are trained by colleges of education. Conversely, colleges of education need the public schools as a source of students and research data, as well as practice subjects for student teaching, internships, and field experiences. However, these forced dependencies sometimes cause clashes between the two institutions. A possible solution is a collaborative venture with mutual benefits. Programs are needed that will provide positive relationships between the two institutions, rather than the negative relationships that are often seen as a result of student teaching (Smith & Auger) and/or research projects (De Bevoise).

In addition to the primary goal of improving the quality of education for children in school, collaborative programs have the potential to create a climate of friendship, trust, and flexibility between involved institutions (Lieberman, 1986). The possibilities for positive outcomes are great, but in reality successful collaboration is difficult and complex. John Goodlad (cited in De Bevoise, 1986) warns that successful collaboration only occurs when both institutions see the collaboration as being in their own self interest. De Bevoise (1986) also points out that collaboration must start with administrative support. Smith and Auger (1985-85) present four key elements necessary for successful collaborative ventures. These are: timeliness, mutuality, trust, and results.

Historical Perspective

Texas Tech University has entered into a cooperative endeavor with the Lubbock Independent School District (L.I.S.D.) as a result of such a collaborative venture between the two educational institutions. Beginning in 1983, the university has effectively leased research services to the public

schools in the form of graduate students assigned to do research for the school district.

The Graduate Assistant/Research Program began as an outgrowth of the Lubbock Council on Education, a collaborative body comprised of top administrators from both institutions and chaired by the L.I.S.D. Superintendent and the Dean of the College of Education at Texas Tech University. Both of these individuals were new to their positions and formed the council as a means of achieving goals they held in common. Several cooperative ventures have been suggested within this council, which have led to mutually beneficial programs such as the Graduate Assistant/Research Program. The top level administrative support, mutual ownership, and perception of mutual benefits have provided a foundation for this highly effective program. The council periodically evaluates this and other cooperative programs established between the two institutions.

Methods and Procedures

Two full time Texas Tech University doctoral students are assigned by the university to the Lubbock Independent School District as Graduate Research

Assistants for a period of one school year. Each Graduate Research Assistant is expected to spend 20 hours per week for the 36 weeks of the public school calendar doing research as directed by the school district. The public school pays the university a stipend based on the standard salary assigned to Graduate Research Assistants by the university. The stipend is routed through the university payroll office, but research directives come from the school district.

The responsibilities of the research assistants cover a wide range. They are or have been involved with the design, implementation, and statistical analysis (when applicable) of research studies relating to: school administrative computer needs; evaluation of Logo computer programming classes (using analysis of covariance); the use of computer-assisted instruction in compensatory reading classes (using analysis of covariance); characteristics and prevention of drop-outs; characteristics of students who failed to master the Texas minimum competency exit-level exam, the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS); early prediction (using multiple regression)

of students at risk to fail the TEAMS; developmental stages of student teachers; students with disciplinary problems (using survey analysis software); and a comparison (using factor analysis) of the cognitive styles measured by a variety of standardized tests.

In other cases, the research assistants have provided guidance in the evaluation of on-going programs in reading, readiness testing, gifted and talented education, and Chapter I. In addition, the research assistants helped design and evaluate a variety of surveys useful to the school district. These efforts include surveys within the school district, within the community, and surveys of other school districts within the state.

One such survey, conducted by the research assistants in April, 1987, of Texas mid-sized school districts (approximately 30,000 students), indicated that 64% of those school districts currently have a research department, although in most cases that research department was combined with the guidance or evaluation department. Districts not owning a research department indicated a need for one.

Results and Conclusions

The program provides mutual benefits for all three of the parties involved:

1. The school district has the advantage of a research department with a low price tag, plus a convenient connection to university services such as the library and the university mainframe for research.

2. The university has the advantage of providing support to promising graduate students at a time when funding is tight, plus the opportunity to develop rapport with public school personnel. Students in the program also have contact with and thus access to experienced university researchers whom they may consult for advice. Although the students often are new to research, the advantage of being able to draw upon the expertise available at the university, due to their status as graduate students, allows them to provide the school district with quality research services.

3. The students receive perhaps the most benefit from the program (both authors are or have been involved in the program). First, the students have the advantage of financial support as they pursue advanced

degrees. Second, the students are afforded an inside view of public school education from the Central Office vantage point. Third, as the students research various problems, they are able to gain experience using the research skills learned through the university. Fourth, some of the research studies have led to presentations and publications by the Graduate Research Assistants. And fifth, a perhaps unexpected benefit to the student is the field experience at the doctoral level. Most of the Graduate Research Assistants involved in the program thus far have taken advantage of this by incorporating their dissertation research into some aspect of the school district's directed research, providing the ultimate in mutual benefit.

Educational Importance

Currently, most large school districts are meeting their research needs through Research Departments specifically assigned to evaluate programs, develop profiles, and filter and disseminate formal research to the classroom teacher. Mid-sized to smaller school districts have similar research needs, but do not have the funding resources needed to hire personnel strictly for research purposes. Therefore, their research needs

are not being met, or are only marginally being met by their current staff.

The Graduate Assistant/Research Program is a unique collaborative venture that is creatively meeting the research needs of a mid-sized public school district and a university college of education. Such collaborative partnerships have the potential for improving education and providing viable alternatives to universities and local schools during this time of change and fiscal constraint (Goodlad, 1983). Both institutions involved in the Graduate Assistant/Research Program have been enriched by the collaboration that has occurred because of a blending of the key elements of timeliness, trust, mutuality, and results (Smith & Auger, 1985-86). Trust and rapport have been enhanced as a result of the mutual cooperation between the two institutions.

Successful collaborative efforts such as the one described in this paper have the potential to affect other aspects of the relationship between universities and public schools and to improve the love/hate relationship that has traditionally plagued educational institutions. This program between Lubbock I.S.D. and

Texas Tech University is an example of a creative model which meets the need for research; furnishes needed support for promising graduate students; and provides a learning experience for the students involved.

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